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The occurrence of *Sporophila hypochroma* and *S. hypoxantha* in Uruguay

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Tawny-bellied Seedeater *Sporophila hypoxantha* and Rufous-rumped Seedeater *S. hypochroma* occur seasonally over much of south-central South America in marshes, flooded grasslands and savanna-like habitats (Ridgely & Tudor 1989, Silva 1999). Whereas *S. hypoxantha* is considered the commonest small seedeater in the region (Ridgely & Tudor 1989), *S. hypochroma* is poorly known and currently treated as globally Near Threatened (BirdLife International 2004). Females and juveniles of both species are indistinguishable, and males are very similar, differing only in the intensity of the rufous coloration on the underparts and rump (Short 1969, Ridgely & Tudor 1989). *S. hypochroma* has not previously been reported in Uruguay, where *S. hypoxantha* is an uncommon summer resident (Azpiroz 2001). Here we report the first records of *S. hypochroma* for Uruguay that form the basis for its inclusion in Rocha (2003) and Claramunt & Cuello (2004). We also evaluate the status of *S. hypoxantha* and conclude that it may be regarded as hypothetical in Uruguay.

SC examined specimens of *Sporophila* in the bird collections of the Museo Nacional de Historia Natural y Antropología (MNHN) and the Facultad de Ciencias, Universidad de la República (ZVC-A), both in Montevideo, Uruguay. Specimens were also compared with representative samples of *S. hypochroma* and *S. hypoxantha* in the Museo Argentino de Ciencias Naturales 'Bernardino Rivadavia', Buenos Aires. During the austral summer of 2002–03, SC and GR surveyed threatened grassland birds in central-west Uruguay during which period they photographed and tape-recorded many seedeaters (Rocha & Claramunt 2003). In January 2003, SC and JA collected birds for MNHN in the departments of Río Negro and Paysandú, during which seedeater specimens were prepared as study skins, and tissue samples, crops and stomachs were preserved in 95% ethanol.

Species accounts

Sporophila hypoxantha

Cabanis (1851) described *S. hypoxantha* based on a specimen from Montevideo. Hellmayr (1938) considered the locality erroneous and suggested Brazil, but proffered no evidence to support his assertion, and subsequent authors have maintained the original locality. The type specimen, purportedly housed in Berlin, has since disappeared from there. It may have been destroyed during World War II or transferred to another museum, but as Hellmayr did not include the type specimen among those he examined, this suggests that it has been missing since the early 20th century at least (he examined other *Sporophila* types in Berlin).

In the Museum Heineanum (Halberstadt) there is a specimen of *S. hypoxantha* (no. 3619) from Montevideo (Fig. 1). The specimen is apparently not the missing type specimen because it came directly from Schaufuss, a natural history dealer, and was received by Ferdinand Heine between 1851 and 1883 (B. Nicolai *in litt.* 2003, 2004). Although worn, the plumage of the specimen is characteristic of an adult male *S. hypoxantha* in definitive plumage.

Subsequently, Gibson (1885) collected a *S. hypoxantha* in dpto. Paysandú, on 11 November 1883. Considering that *S. hypochroma* had yet to be described, the identification of this specimen should be checked. Unfortunately, its whereabouts are unknown.

Following almost a century without records, Vaz-Ferreira *et al.* (1981) reported the rediscovery of *S. hypoxantha* in Uruguay based on a specimen and sight records in dpto. Artigas. However, as detailed below, the specimen was misidentified, thus also invalidating the sight records.

Finally, the only modern reference to the occurrence of *S. hypoxantha* in Uruguay is a small-image photograph deposited at MNHN, taken by Enrique Gómez-Haedo near Conchillas, dpto. Colonia, in December 1995 (Fig. 2). The photograph depicts a seedeater and two Bay-winged Cowbirds *Molothrus badius* on a large stone used as a feeder. The crown, nape and back of the seedeater are bluish grey, as in definitive-plumaged males. The underparts are tawny rufous. If the colours are accurate, the combination of these two features indicates a definitive-plumaged male *S. hypoxantha*; the colour of the dorsal parts eliminates a subadult *S. hypochroma*.

Sporophila hypochroma

The specimen ZVC-A 1067, reported by Vaz-Ferreira *et al.* (1981) as *S. minuta hypoxantha* is, in fact, a definitive-plumaged male *S. hypochroma*. The crown, hindneck and back are deep bluish grey, and the underparts chestnut, similar in intensity to those of *S. cinnamomea*, rather than the more tawny underparts of *S. hypoxantha*. The specimen was collected, on 28 January 1981, at Arrocería Conti (= 'establecimiento San Pedro', 30°33'S, 57°52'W), 39 km south-west of Bella Unión, dpto. Artigas.



Figure 1. Specimen of *Sporophila hypoxantha* from Montevideo (no. 3619) in the Museum Heineanum, Halberstadt, Germany (Bernd Nicolai)



Figure 2. *Sporophila hypoxantha* near Conchillas, dpto. Colonia, Uruguay, December 1995 (Enrique Gómez-Haedo)

On 29 December 2002, we tape-recorded and photographed a male *S. hypochroma* at a small meadow 6 km north-west of Lorenzo Geyres, dpto. Paysandú (32°03'S, 57°58'W). One male *S. cinnamomea*, two unidentified female seedeaters, and a singing male Dark-throated Seedeater *S. ruficollis* were also present. On 24 January 2003, a male *S. hypochroma* was collected near a bridge over Agesta stream, 3 km west-northwest of Lorenzo Geyres (32°04'S, 57°57'W). Both *S. cinnamomea* and *S. ruficollis* were also present. The specimen, MNHN 6109, is a definitive-plumaged male *S. hypochroma* similar to ZVC-A 1067. It had enlarged and vascularised testes (6.9 x 5.5 mm) and a pronounced cloacal protuberance, indicating that the bird was in full breeding condition.

Discussion

Historical evidence suggests the occurrence of *S. hypoxantha* in Uruguay during the 19th century, but evidence for its occurrence in the 20th century is scarcer. We were unable to locate any modern specimen and, excluding the unreliable reports of Vaz-Ferreira *et al.* (1981), there are no published 20th-century records from Uruguay. The only evidence for the species' recent occurrence is the photograph mentioned above. *S. hypoxantha* may prove to be rare or occasional along the Uruguay River, but in the absence of recent documentation the species should currently be considered hypothetical in Uruguay.

However, we found concrete evidence of the occurrence of *S. hypochroma* in Uruguay, which was unknown from the Mesopotamian grasslands until 1967, when a specimen was collected in Corrientes, Argentina (Short 1969). Subsequently, the species was recorded farther south, in the provinces of Entre Ríos and Buenos Aires. That it was unrecorded until 1981 in Uruguay is consistent with the notion that *S. hypochroma* is expanding its range, although it is also possible that the species has been overlooked.

The presence of *S. hypochroma* in western Uruguay further highlights the importance of the region for the conservation of *Sporophila* seedeaters. This area holds at least three other globally threatened and one Near-Threatened *Sporophila*. Although unrecorded in Uruguay prior to 1989, the Vulnerable *S. cinnamomea* is fairly common in parts of Río Negro and Paysandú (Azpiroz 2001, Rocha & Claramunt 2003). The Critically Endangered Entre Ríos Seedeater *S. zelichi*, recently discovered in south-east Uruguay (Azpiroz 2003), also occurs in western Uruguay (Venzal & Stagi 2001, Azpiroz 2003). The Near-Threatened *S. ruficollis* is also relatively common and widespread in the west of the country (Azpiroz 2001, Venzal & Stagi 2001). Furthermore, there are both old (Vaz-Ferreira & Gerzenstein 1961) and recent (Rocha & Claramunt 2003) records of the Endangered Marsh Seedeater *S. palustris*. Thus, although not included by Silva (1999) as a priority area, western Uruguay harbours, at least occasionally, as many as five seedeater species of conservation concern, and is among the most important areas for threatened seedeaters in the continent.

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